

Shoreham Hotel
(St. Mary's by the Sea)
New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail
Lincoln and Lehigh avenues
Cape May Point
Cape May County
New Jersey

HABS No. NJ-1115

HABS
NJ
5-CAPMAP,
6-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

THE SHOREHAM HOTEL (St. Mary's by the Sea)

HABS NO. NJ-1115

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6-

Location: Lincoln and Lehigh avenues, Cape May Point, Cape May County, New Jersey

Present Owner: Convent of the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Chestnut Hill
9601 Germantown Avenue
Chestnut Hill, Pennsylvania 19118

Present Use: Summer retreat house of the Convent of the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Chestnut Hill

Significance: This building was constructed in 1889 as the Shoreham hotel. In design, it was more closely related to 1840s style hotels, reflecting the architectural (and social) conservatism of Cape May in competition with other shore resorts such as Atlantic City. The exterior, guest rooms, and corridors remain quite unaltered, because of light use, continuity in ownership, owner's low budget, and respect for relatively spartan conditions of an 1890s hotel.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: The Shoreham Hotel was erected in 1889.
2. Architect: Unknown.
3. Original and subsequent owners: Anson H. Hamilton, of the borough of Cape May Point, bought the property now occupied by St. Mary's-by-the-sea from Israel H. Johnson and his wife in November 1881.¹ In December 1889, Hamilton, listed as a real estate agent, secured a \$20,000 mortgage from Charles H. Otterson, attorney from Philadelphia; the debt was to be paid back in two years with the 6% interest paid half yearly.² Otterson, however, sold the mortgage a few months later to the New Jersey Trust and Safe Deposit Company, based in Camden, in March 1890. One year later, the Home for Aged and Infirm Colored Persons, of Philadelphia, bought the mortgage in March 1891, with Anson Hamilton still the mortgagor.³

On May 1, 1893, the clerk recorded that Trenton's Court of Chancery had ordered the sheriff to sell the ten lots, including the hotel, to satisfy the debt owed to the Home for Aged and Infirm Colored Persons. The Sheriff advertized the auction in local papers for a month, and court

¹ Deed book No.52, p.308. Cape May County records held in Cape May Courthouse Clerk's office.

² Mortgages book No.29, pp. 33-5.

³ Assignment of Mortgages, Book No.3, pp. 333 and 357.

accepted the Home's bid of \$15,000 for the property.⁴ The Home sold the property to Randall T. Hazzard of Philadelphia in January of 1898, including the "three story frame building...known as the 'Shoreham Hotel.'"⁵ After Randall Hazzard's death on July 3, 1905, his widow Almira took ownership, and in May of 1909 she sold the Shoreham building, the ten lots, and 14 additional lots, to the Convent for "one dollar and other good and valuable consideration."⁶

The Convent has owned and occupied St. Mary's since 1909, except for the years 1941-1946, during which the U.S. Army leased and occupied the building.

4. Alterations and Additions: The Sisters converted the first-floor ballroom into a chapel. Several of the bedrooms have been reconfigured, and a few have been added at the ends of corridors. Two former open dormitory-style rooms on the third floor have been converted into a total of twenty private rooms. Panelling, added about 1980, covers the walls of the entrance hall, chapel, and dining room. St. Mary's has added modern plumbing and baths. The residential corridors and guest rooms are little altered; most guest rooms lack electricity. Many of the rooms contain chairs and rocking chairs that date from the place's tenure as the Shoreham. Crosses now top the roof peaks at each corner. A major storm in March 1962 severely damaged some of the porches--especially at the end of the east wing--but these were restored. Most of the porch railings and columns have been replaced over the years. A back boiler room now juts out from the original building.

B. Historical Context:

The land now known as Cape May Point was purchased by the Dutch West India Company from Native Americans in 1630; the parcel comprised a four mile tract extending north from the tip of the Island. In 1710 Henry Stites bought the southernmost piece of this land, giving it the name Stites Beach. A 1766 advertisement in the Pennsylvania Gazette suggests that the lower Cape May County region was already a seaside destination, and the construction of public roads in the area during the last two decades of the eighteenth century provides additional evidence that Cape May Island was an early resort.⁷ Early visitors arrived by both stagecoach and water. The island entered a new stage in its growth when in 1801 "the tiny beachfront community of Delaware River pilots and mariners" began to promote itself as a seaside resort, attracting the

⁴ Deed book No. 109, pp. 302-4. The court's order was issued against Cape May Point Cottage Company, Joseph Swain, and the Mayor and council of the Borough of Cape May Point. The Home claimed \$24,040 in principal and interest, and there was also a debt of \$654.15 in unpaid taxes. The lots were 26-30, 35-9, in Block G.

⁵ Deed book, No. 137, pp.235-7.

⁶ Deed book, No. 235, pp.191-2.

⁷ Jeffery M. Dorwart. Cape May County, New Jersey: The Making of an American Resort Community (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), p.63.

region's gentry.⁸

A regular steamboat service was in place by the 1820s, running between the Island and Philadelphia and Delaware. This service by the mid 1840s had primarily replaced the stagecoach route, which hurt relations between the growing resort and inland communities such as Dennis Creek. The steamboats landed at what is now Cape May Point, as well as Higbee's beach. During these years, large, barnlike wood-frame hotels served vacationers.⁹ Perhaps the construction of the Mount Vernon Hotel best symbolizes the area's explosive growth. Constructed in the early 1850s, the hotel was intended to be the largest in the world; its services included hot and cold water faucets and gaslights. By the time that the Mount Vernon burned to the ground in 1856, twenty-four hotels entertained the Island's guests. The Civil War brought high prices and a step down from the successes of the ante-belleum years, partly due to the drop-off in southern patronage. In summer 1863, the Cape May & Millville railroad arrived in Cape Island, which shortened a practically full-day trip from Philadelphia to three and a half hours. The railroad would serve an important role in opening up the homogeneous Island to new influences.¹⁰

A major fire in 1878 devastated the Cape May City economy--especially the hotel businesses. In reconstructing the city, developers returned to the "traditional" styles which had characterized the resort since the 1840s. For example, although the Congress Hotel was rebuilt in fire-proof brick, the design returned to the 1840s L-shaped plan, extensive verandas, flat roof, and simple ornamentation. Cape May's adherence to earlier designs stands out in comparison with other resorts such as Atlantic City, which experimented with the new Queen Anne style and other Victorian forms. Then in the early years of the twentieth century, Atlantic City forged ahead in using brick, steel, and reinforced concrete. Cape May witnessed a few efforts to pioneer the Queen Anne and masonry construction, but they were not imitated (see Town of Cape May City, HABS No. NJ-1053).¹¹ In the 1880s, local entrepreneur Jonathan Cone, owner of the steamer service, constructed the Delaware Bay and Cape May Railroad in 1879. A narrow-gage track brought steamship arrivals from Cape May Point, along the beach, to the City. 1880s growth also introduced a racetrack and grandstand, and a driving park. Entrepreneurs attempted to develop the land between the City and the Point, including a tin elephant which operated as land company headquarters. Though vacationers did build cottages, sales were slow; South Cape May survived as a separate borough until 1945, when most of the houses had washed out to sea.¹²

Cape May Point, as a steamship depot, had played an integral role in the island's development--

⁸ Ibid., p. 70.

⁹ Ibid., p. 70 and 106.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 106-113.

¹¹ George Thomas and Carl Doebley, Cape May, Queen of the Seaside Resorts: Its History and Architecture (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1976), Chapter 1, passim.

¹² Dorwart, Cape May County, New Jersey, pp. 157-9.

but in the 1870s it was established as a separate community--a religious resort. The town was founded in 1875 as Sea Grove by the Sea Grove Association, backed by religious leaders, businessmen (including John Wanamaker), and speculators. The Association acquired 266 acres for five dollars from a Philadelphia Presbyterian leader and cotton merchant--Alexander Whilldin--who had inherited the property through marriage. Temperance concerns shaped Sea Grove's founding; the association's rules forbid liquor and amusements.¹³

Whilldin created another organization (Union Hall Association) to undertake hotel and cottage construction; within a few years three hotels and several houses had been built. The Sea Grove Association laid out the streets in a radial pattern, which led to a central octagonal pavilion designed by Philadelphia architect James C. Sidney and constructed in 1875. Having invested \$500,000, the Sea Grove Association sold their assets for a loss in 1881. By that time the name of the community had been changed to Cape May Point.¹⁴

The little community faced financial troubles almost from the start. Incorporated as a borough in 1878, Cape May Point warded off bankruptcy and had difficulty paying county taxes. Socially prominent investors, with an eye toward how President Grant's visits had boosted Long Branch, enterprisingly donated a cottage to President Harrison, but he rarely availed himself of the gift.¹⁵ Where Cape May City struggled through lean years of the 1880s and 1890s, Cape May Point fared even worse.

Little has been recorded of the impetus behind the construction of the Shoreham Hotel, now St. Mary's-by-the-Sea. Erected in 1890, the Shoreham was most likely at the tail end of aggressive efforts to revitalize the resort area. Unfortunately, three years later the Depression of 1893 triggered a wave of local bankruptcies and unemployment, and undoubtedly contributed to the hotel's failure within its first decade.

An excerpt from the hotel's prospectus, quoted at length below, emphasizes the hotel's spectacular location--its views, porches, modern appointments, and services. While the Shoreham promoted itself as "the most reasonably priced first-class hotel in the world," comparing the simplicity of the hotel's "traditional" design to photographs and descriptions of contemporary grand hotels in Europe and America, one sees that the Shoreham was certainly a poor country cousin. Thus despite its grand ballroom and "excellent cuisine," the Shoreham was more indicative of the conservatism of Cape May citizens, and their decision at the turn of the century to choose a different course from Atlantic City. In doing so, Cape May diverged from the changing standards of seashore resorts.¹⁶

¹³ Ibid., p.122.

¹⁴ Ibid., p.122.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp.159-60.

¹⁶ The prospectus has unfortunately not been located. It was quoted in St. Mary's-by-the-Sea 1956 "Book of Memories," Convent Archives at Convent of the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Chestnut Hill, p.1.

After the hotel's failure, it was purchased in 1893 by Philadelphia's Home for Aged and Infirm Colored People, which had held the mortgage. There is no evidence, except for the belief of the nuns, that the Home actually operated the Shoreham as a summer residence. Further research into the history of the Home would probably clarify this question.¹⁷ The first years of the century witnessed an increase in racial discrimination in the region. Cape May City created a segregated high school, and in 1901 the Cape May Herald pushed for the removal of all blacks from Cape May City--partly on the excuse of blaming African-Americans for the City's decline since the Civil War. In the same year, black leaders organized the Colored American Equitable Industrial Association, whose purpose was to found an African-American town and to establish institutions to care for blacks. Black leaders did succeed in launching a town--Whitesboro.¹⁸ Further research might establish connections between the founders of the Colored American Equitable Industrial Association, Philadelphia benevolent institutions, and the purchase of the Shoreham Hotel.

Randall T. Hazzard bought the property in 1898. The 1890 Philadelphia City Directory identifies him as running a paperhanging and house painting business. At the time of his purchase, the building was, according to the deed registration, still known as the Shoreham Hotel.¹⁹

Hazzard's use of the property is unclear. In 1909 the property was purchased from Randall Hazzard's widow Almira by the Sisters of St. Joseph in Philadelphia. Reverend Daniel I. McDermott, pastor of St. Mary's Church in Philadelphia, assisted the Sisters in finding a retreat and negotiating its sale. He had apparently been interested in the former Shoreham since 1900.²⁰ The Sisters named the building in appreciation for the reverend's help. Except for 1941-6 when the U.S. Army used the property (and treated it quite harshly), St. Mary's-by-the-Sea has operated as a retreat for the Sisters of St. Joseph.²¹ According to the 1956 "Book of Memories," the Army residency resulted in the loss of much of St. Mary's early records.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

¹⁷ In 1881, the Philadelphia City Directory lists the Home at Girard Avenue and Belmont Avenue; the 1898 directory gives the address of 4400 Girard Avenue. During these years several other homes for colored children and persons were listed in the directory. The Home's secretary in 1898, Thomas H. McCollin, is identified as having a company under his own name in "photographic materials." During these years he resided in the suburbs--in Lansdown in 1890, and Haverford in 1898.

¹⁸ Dorwart, Cape May County, New Jersey, p.172.

¹⁹ Deed book No. 137, pp.235-7.

²⁰ Unidentified clipping, Convent files. The clipping indicates that the Sisters bought the Shoreham for \$9,000, including furnishings, but as noted earlier, the deed states that the purchase price was \$1.

²¹ "A History/Slide Presentation: St. Mary-by-the-Sea, Cape May Point, NJ," June 17 & 18, 1990, pp.1-2, Convent files.

1. Architectural character: St. Mary's is a typical late nineteenth-century wood, seaside hotel. Its "U" plan maximized the ocean view, while its porches and rocking chairs made use of the breezes and beautiful setting. The simple guest rooms, each with a corner closet and somewhat uncomfortable chairs, are approximately 10' x 13'--and are most notable for their view. The common spaces--ballroom, dining room, and lobby--are large and airy, with many openings to the outdoors, including tall windows. Both interior and exterior lack elaborate detailing, and there is no evidence that the hotel ever possessed more ornament or architectural detail--except a flagpole from its center roof peak. The hotel's prospectus confirms this emphasis on location and services, rather than the style or detail of the hotel. According to the prospectus, the Shoreham was "the most magnificently located ocean front hotel on the Atlantic Coast, with 150 rooms facing the ocean--has every modern appointment for comfort--the most reasonably priced first-class hotel in the world, excellent cuisine and service, the finest American and European plans, music and ballrooms, dining room facing ocean, 1200 feet of porches, beautiful lawn running 200 feet to water, bathhouses in hotel, pure spring water, absolute sanitation, orchestra, livery, etc."²²
2. Condition of fabric: The Sisters appear to have scrupulously cared for St. Mary's. Except for the conversion of the ballroom into a chapel, and new panelling on the first floor, their alterations have been inconspicuous. And except for a few spots on the third floor, there's little peeling paint or obvious disrepair. Therefore the 103 year-old, unwinterized, wood building by the damp seashore has survived well. Although the Sisters have done their best with their building, the ocean does not necessarily hold the same respect, and St. Mary's is at extreme risk from future storms and beach erosion.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: This is a two-and-a-half-story, U-shaped structure with porches along the inside elevations on both the first and second stories.
2. Foundations: The building rests on square 2' brick piers.
3. Wall construction: The walls are covered with wood siding.
4. Structural system, framing: The structural system is of wood, presumably balloon, framing.
5. Porches: A two-story wood porch lines the interior of the "U", and the ends of the building facing the ocean. On the first floor, the porch also extends along the outside of the west wing, and around the outside turret portion of the east wing. On the second floor, the porch wraps around the turret portions of both the east and west wings, and surrounds the northwest corner, above the main entrance.
6. Chimneys: There is one chimney for the kitchen.
7. Openings:

²² As quoted in the 1956 "Book of Memories," p.1, Convent archives.

a. Doorways and doors: The main entrance is located at the building's northwest corner--according to Sister Pat O'Donnell, this was the original hotel's entrance. There are multiple entrances from corridors and interior rooms onto the porches; the chapel (former ballroom) has three doors onto the courtyard porch.

b. Windows: The first and second floors have tall windows, nearly floor-to-ceiling, twelve-over-one-light-sash windows. Most of the windows are original.

8. Roof:

a. Shape, covering: The roof has an unusual and elegant shape, strongly defining the hotel, which would otherwise be a simple U-shaped frame building. At the four "corners" of the U-plan, the roof has a mansard-style third story with shed dormers, and the roof rises an extra half story in a shallow hipped style to a gentle point (each point now topped by crosses). At these corners, and at the base of the "U," the roof gently flares out from the bases of the dormer windows to shelter the second-story porch. At the center of the base of the "U" is another hipped roof which rises, not to a point, but to a small flat area, apparently originally the stand for a large flagpole. In the other sections of the roof, primarily the sides of the "U", the roof is gabled with widely-spaced shed dormers. The roof is covered in red shingling.

b. Cornice: The porch roofs and roof eaves have closely-spaced rafter ends, echoed in the shed-style dormer window "roofs."

c. Dormers, towers: The four corners and the bottom of the "U" have shed-style dormer windows. Where another roof level rises above these windows, the shed window's "roof" effectively continues the line of that higher roof.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: Original floor plans have not survived. A clear but not-to-scale plan of the first, second, and third floors, measured very approximately was drawn by Sister Pat O'Donnell in 1989 and 1990 (see pages 10-12). The first floor has the common areas--dining room, entrance hall, chapel, while the north wing has guest rooms. The second floor is entirely guest rooms, while the third floor is a combination of guest rooms, bathing facilities, and storage space.
2. Stairways: The main entrance hall stairway has a jigsaw cut-out balustrade. The other stairways are narrow enclosed, single-flight stairways.
3. Flooring: The flooring in the guest rooms, corridors, and most common areas, including the chapel, are finished wood. The kitchen has linoleum over concrete, while the community room is carpeted. According to Sister Dorothy Annis, the unfinished third-floor spaces were floored in the late 1940s, and the floors in the dining room and the second floor appear to be original. Most of the first-floor rooms seem to have the original wood underneath carpets or additional wood flooring.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: Interior walls appear to be in excellent condition; the first and second floor residential corridors and guest rooms are freshly painted in different solid colors--pink,

yellow, and blue. Third floor presents more deterioration. The wall and ceiling finishes are for the most part a rough plaster finish on wood, although, portions of the third floor remain unfinished wood. The entrance hall/community room and the chapel have synthetic paneling and (slightly) dropped ceilings.

5. Doorways and doors: Most of the interior doors appear to be original. Each guest room has a "closet"--a door mounted across a corner. These closet doors are four panel.
6. Mechanical systems:
 - a. Refrigeration: The hotel's original wood refrigerators have been electrified and are now used as freezers.
 - b. Lighting fixtures: The corridors have occasional bare bulbs in the ceiling; most guest rooms lack electricity. Recent exploration in the attic crawl spaces uncovered two large lighting fixtures, apparently for outside use, made in 1890. The building appears to have had gas lighting, as the knobs are still there. (interview Dorothy Annis)
 - c. Heating: There is no heating system.

D. Site:

1. General Setting: St. Mary's faces Southeast.
2. Outbuildings: The 1962 storm washed away bathhouses which probably dated to its use as a hotel.
3. Landscaping, enclosures: A century of erosion has eaten away the Shoreham's 200 foot lawn which had led to the ocean; today St. Mary's is directly adjacent to the narrow beach. The building, as the Sisters are aware, is in clear danger of being destroyed in a storm. Several religious statues now mark the grounds.

Prepared by:
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HABS Historian
Summer 1992

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- A. Old views: Library of Congress print.

- B. Primary and unpublished sources: In 1990 the Sisters celebrated the 100th anniversary of their building. County archives--the Historical Society--appear to have little information on the Shoreham Hotel and St. Mary's. The Convent Archives at Mount St. Joseph's/Chestnut Hill College (215-248-7275) has folders of clippings, "memory books" and artifacts, such as a key to Room 10 of the Shoreham. See also:

Sebold, Kimberly, and Sara Amy Leach. Historic Themes and Resources within the New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail: Southern New Jersey and the Delaware Bay. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, 1991).

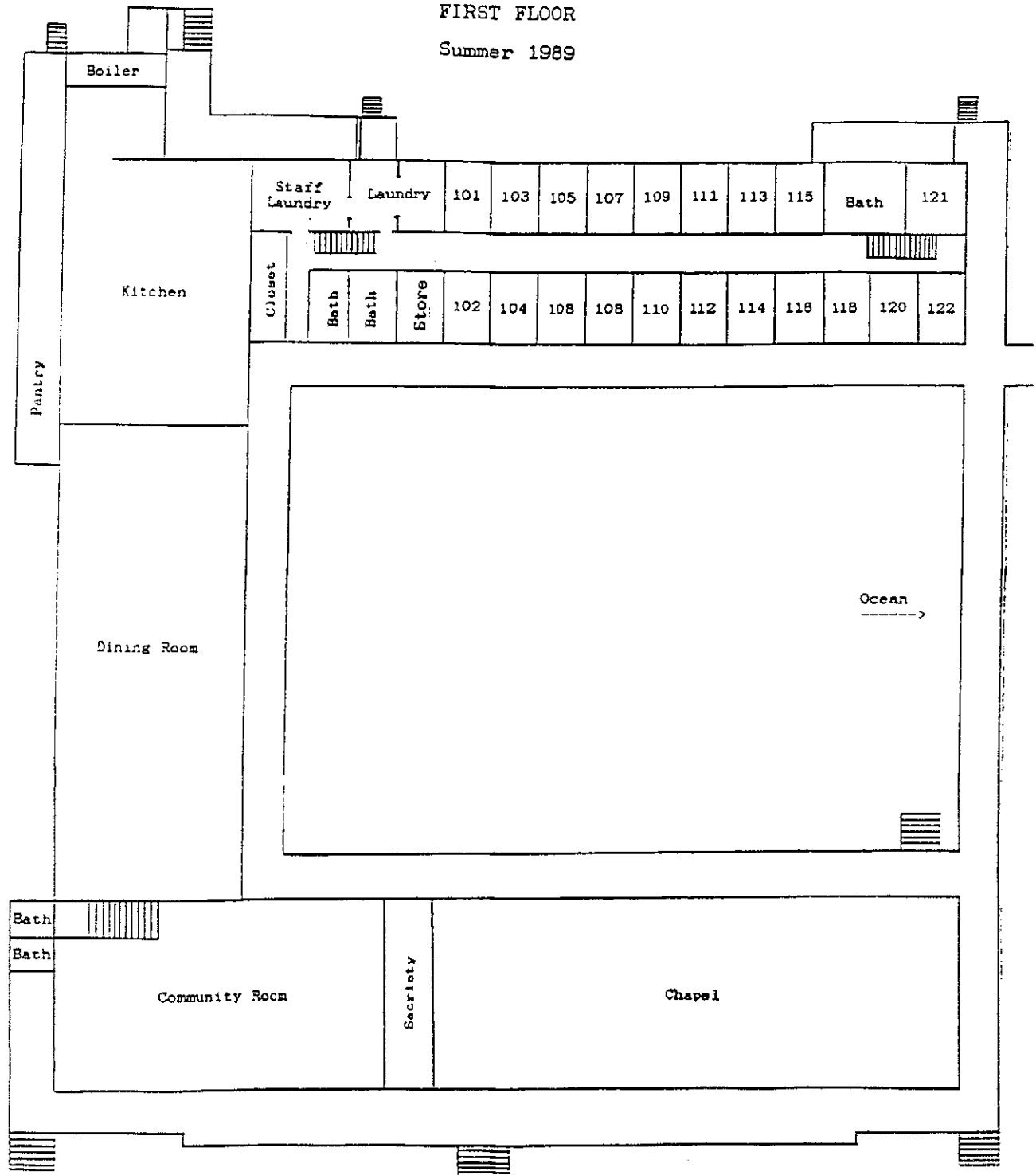
PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

The project was sponsored by the New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail (NJCHT) of the National Park Service, Janet Wolf, director. The documentation was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS), Robert Kapsch, chief, under the direction of Sara Amy Leach, HABS historian. The project was completed during summer 1992. The project historian was Alison Isenberg (University of Pennsylvania). The photography was produced by David Ames, University of Delaware, Center for Historic Architecture and Engineering.

SAINT MARY BY-THE-SEA
CAPE MAY POINT, NEW JERSEY

FIRST FLOOR

Summer 1989

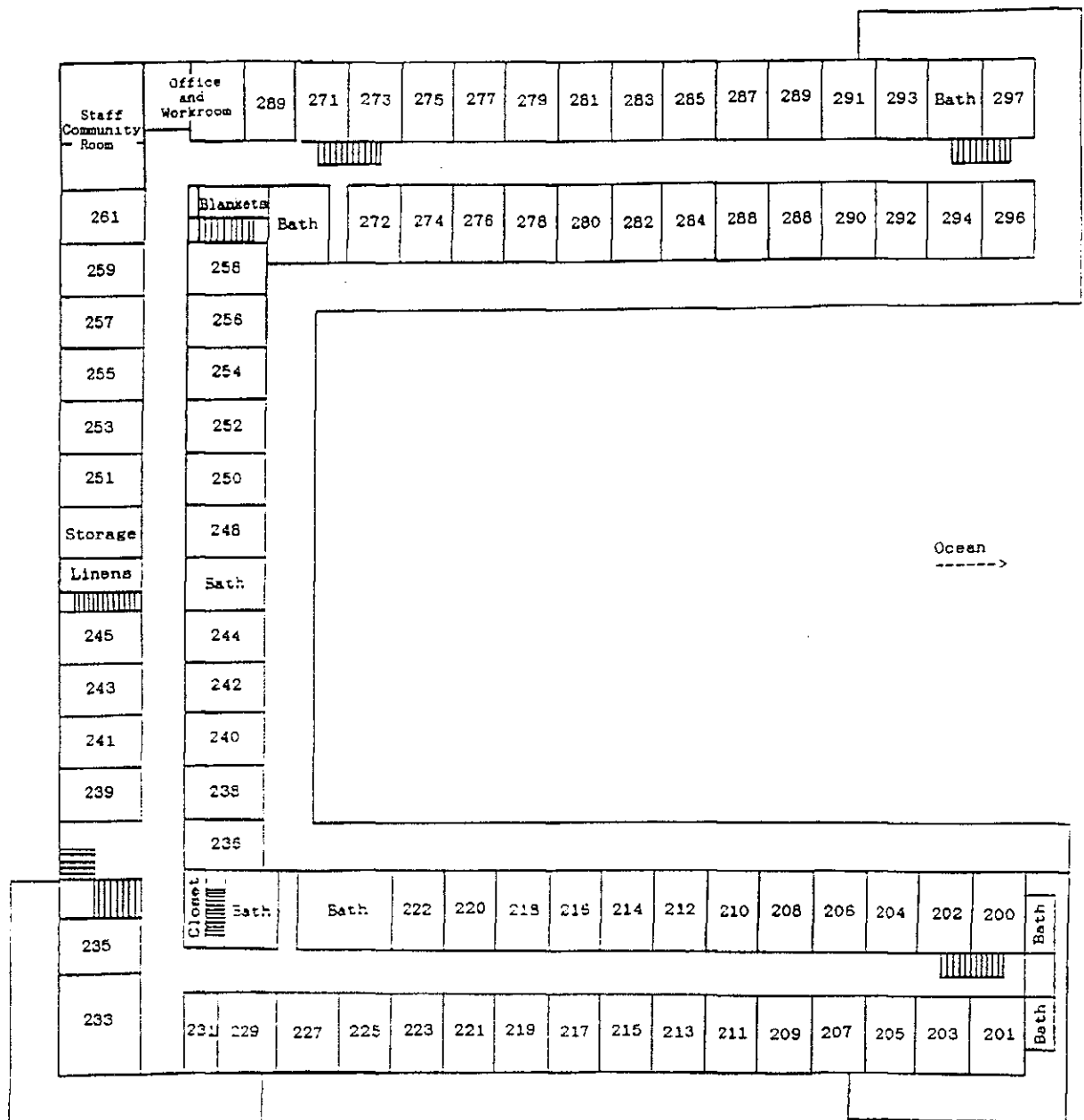


Summer 1989/Page 27

Drawn to approximate scale by Sister Pat O'Donnell, 1989-90.

SAINT MARY BY-THE-SEA
CAPE MAY POINT, NEW JERSEY

SECOND FLOOR

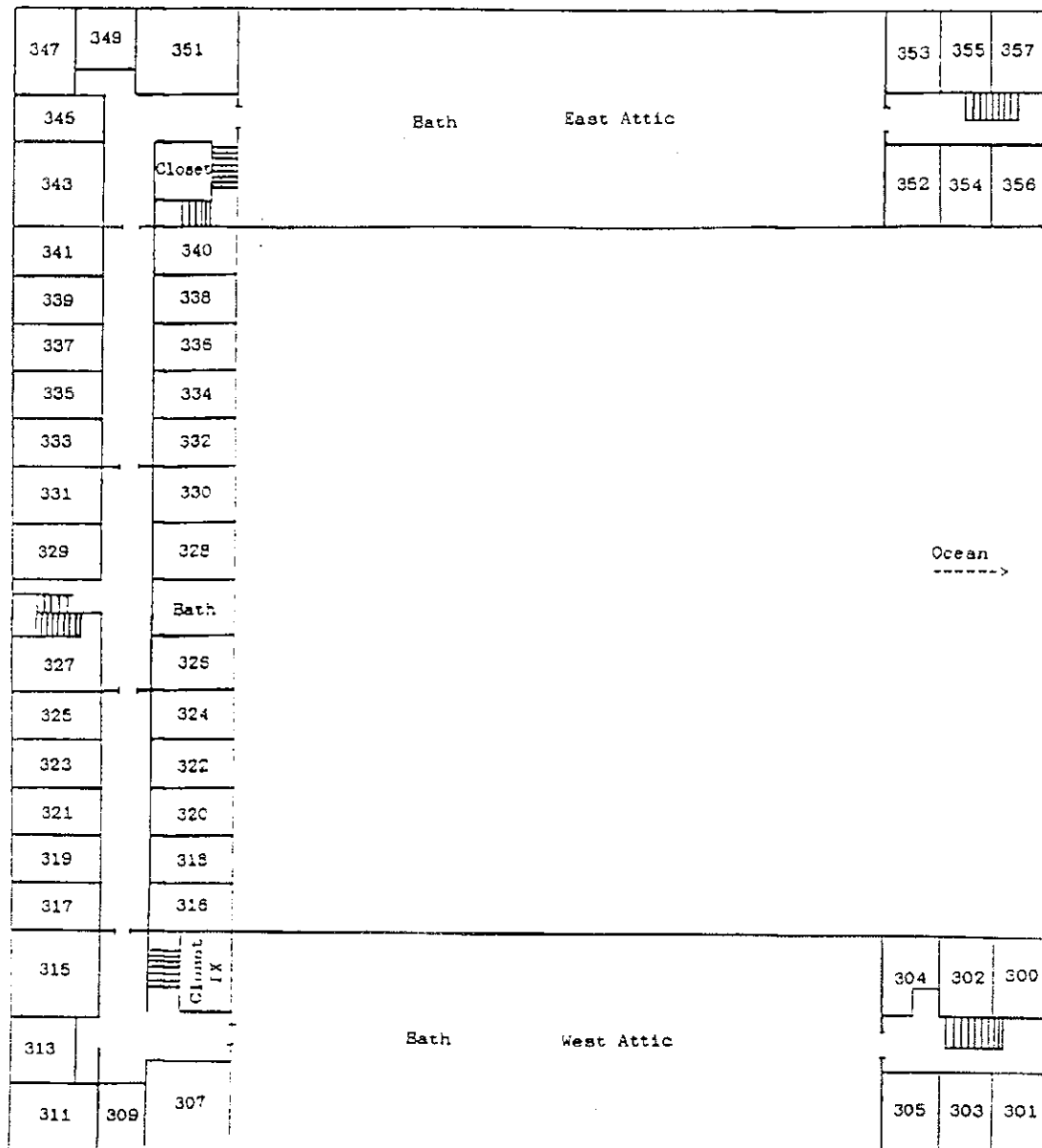


June 1990

Drawn to approximate scale by Sister Pat O'Donnell, 1989-90.

SAINT MARY BY-THE-SEA
CAPE MAY POINT, NEW JERSEY

THIRD FLOOR



June 1990

Drawn to approximate scale by Sister Pat O'Donnell, 1989-90.